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ABSTRACT

People United for Rural Education (PURE), organized in Iowa in 1977, now has about 3,000 members in 23 states and 3 foreign countries. PURE's purpose is to ensure the survival of rural schools and to promote rural life as a viable and credible way of life. One of the organization's most difficult tasks is to counteract urban attitudes towards rural schools and communities. These negative attitudes are primarily distributed through the mass media, especially in print, and have a strong influence on urban and rural residents alike. PURE's central political thrust is to let state legislators and departments of education know that small rural schools are efficient, creative, and resourceful, and that they are worthy of the support necessary for their continuance. (SB)

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Political Action In Rural Education

Roger Baskerville
Lohrville, Iowa

February 3, 1977 changed the course of my life. I won't contend that it was a permanent change. I won't even say that it 'bettered' my 'lot' in life. All I know is that, once again, I became a 'political animal' destined to become involved in People United for Rural Education (P.U.R.E.) From a tiny band of concerned, rural citizens gathered in the Iowa Senate on a cold Febraury evening, we have emerged as a dues-paying 'volunteer' organization numbering approximately 3,000 members. P.U.R.E. constituents are found in 234 schools in 23 states and 3 foregin countries. As State Advisor for P.U.R.E. I have traveled 23,000 volunteer miles across Iowa helping to form local People United for Rural Education chapters. I have taken our message wherever any one would listen. I have spoken in gymnasiums, lunch rooms, cow lots, barns, restaurants and private homes. I have addressed conventions, educational fairs, workshops, seminars, professional gatherings, the State Board of Public Instruction, the State Budget Review Committee and as Iowa Legislative investigation committee. I have testified on the credibility of rural education and our fight for survival in Miami, San Francisco, Washington D.C. and in the State Supreme Court Chambers of Columbus, Ohio. In other words, I'm exhausted. I'm never home. My wife left me, my kids don't remember me, the dog bites me when I come in the door, and the cat resigned to start an anonymous fertility clinic. But first things first. You see, I despise 'politics.' Whenever anyone asks our political affiliation I tell them I'm a Republican, the wife's a

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Democrat, the kid's wet, the cow's dry and the cat's a populist.

The very essense of the word 'political; denotes "shrewdness," "sagaciousness," "artful, often dishonest practices," and "competition." Those descriptions are from Webster. I didn't invent them. Don't get me wrong; I have absolutely nothing against sagacity, shrewdness, art, and yes, I can spell 'dishonest.' It's the 'competition' thing that bothers me. It's damn hard to be competitive, and winm when you're always the underdog;when you're always representing the educational interests of a truely viable minority called Agrarians, better known as 'rural folk' to those enlightened urban intellectuals sitting among us this morning.

Involved in politics once again. I promised myself, following an excurison in Uncle's Army (1969-1970) that I would never, ever again become the passionate, concerned visionary I once imagined myself to be, lsoing sleep and gaining ulcers over issues. I even volunteered for the Army. My lottery number was 352. While an English major graduate student at the University of Nebraska in 1968 I watched a group of NROTC Cadets marching by. That did it. You see, I'm a rural boy. I was raised with a loyalty to God and Country. (I'm still loyal to God and Country, but the Nebraska Cornhuskers now receive equal time for my loyalist activities.) Anyway, I went with all due speed to the Federal Building in Lincoln, Nebraska and volunteered my services to the cause. I'll never forget the look on Staff Sergeant Zachary's Wheat's Face.

"You being drafted, kid?'"

"No Sir. My number is 352 and I want to enlist."

"Whatsa matter, kid, you runnin' a fever?"

"No Sir! I want to serve my country. Mine is the profession of arms, the will to win, the sure knowledge that in any war there is no substitute for victory, that if we lose the very nation will be destroyed, that the very essense of my public service must be honor, duty...."

"Yeah, yeah kid. Fine, fine." Wheat choked down the rest of his Twinkie and unwrapped a Ho-Ho. "Hey, Corporal Barnes, c'mere! Get a load of the Section 8!"

To make a long story short, and several sanity tests later, I was allowed to join the Army. In basic training our company was asked by a Drill Sergeant if any one in the group had a college education. Two of us held up our hands. He said "O.K., you guys get out here and pick up these cigarette butts. The rest of you dummies watch; you might learn something."

That's why I lost my interest in politics. Multiply that one element of the human comedy by 800 days and it won't take too long to realize the sum of the final product;disillusionment with the system. How can it be fought? How does one stand up and not only be counted and heard, but listened to as well?

I previously said that "once again, I became a 'political animal.'" Let me breifly explain my prior experience in the 'arena.' My grandparents lived on the same farm as my parents; approximately 50 yards from our house. I really grew up with two sets of Moms and Dads. (i also grew up with six meals a day.) The interesting part, though,

is that for years my Mother was Cahriperson of the Calhoun County Republican Women, and Grnadmother was Chairperson for the Calhoun Democratic Women. Mon Dieu. You talk about war! Every two years the shared clothesline became, virtually, a no-man's land. The editorial page of the daily peper was either the gospel or the funnies, depending, of course, on whose house you happened to be in at the moment. Mom always said that not all Democrats were horse thieves; just that all horse thieves were democrats. And my Grandmother always voted for the man, she contended, regardless of his race, creed, nationality or status in the Democratic Party.

Politics: That's what P.U.R.E. is all about. From 16 people with a common goal and purpose (the survival of our schools and the promotion of rural as a viable, credible way of life) to 3,000 people with volunteer lobbyists in Des Moines and Washington, D.C. We have been affective. We have sponsored, and won, amendments to the financial formula. We have successfully assisted other 'special' interest groups in gaining legislative support. But for every time P.U.R.E. has succeeded, we have been rebuked and rebuffed and rebuttled. Originally we argued back with good old fashioned 'emotion.' We cried 'identity!' They countered with 'is it good for the children?' We yelled 'motherhood!' They replied 'gender.' We shouted 'apple pie!' They implied 'sour grapes.' We have screamed 'but it isn't fair!' They have smirked 'objectivity.'

For years legislative leaders and educational headmasters within the State of Iowa have told enlightened proponents of rural education that educational values cannot be argued "emotionally. We must be

'objective' in charting the future of Iowa schools" Educators and lay citizens were literally besieged with reports, studies, data, significant percentages, correlations, norms, means, medians, transactional analyses, assumptions, null hypotheses, rejections and acceptances at' predetermined alpha levels. control groups, experimental groups, cost efficiency studies, centralization studies, program deficiency reports, educational modes and models of all shapes and sizes, and conclusions ranging from the unthinkable to the unintelligible.

Like good debaters, rural citizens complied. Rural-biased research now matches urban-biased research. A 'significant' counter-point has been established for every researched contention; on both sides of the issue.

As the studies have grown more voluminous, however, so have the 'emotions' and/or 'opinions' of well-intentioned social scientists and educational researchers trying to 'drive home' a logical point of 'common sense;' (or perhaps uncommon sense?) In striving to detect a light at the end of the "where-will-it-all-end" tunned, I have found it next to impossible to divorce 'emotionalism' from any study or report dealing with that intangible term, EDUCATION. Every morsel, every tidbit, every aspect of education which touches a life evokes an emotion. In some, this emotion is more readily observable; in others it bubbles, flows, or resides below the visible surface. Denial of this 'opinion' on 'emotion' being inherent within a human to human learning/teaching situation would lead one to question whether students are flesh and blood recipients of knowledge, or mechanical learning devices. It only seems logical to assume that when people teach other

people, a certain degree of emotionalism or opinion will become a significant part of the learning process. And, if my learned colleagues will forgive this rather humble attempt at syllogistic reasoning, do not human emotions, derived through learning processes, invariably lead to the formulation of hu,am attitudes? If this conclusion is acceptable, what we really have is a study on attitudes, human attitudes formulated through, and by, human emotions. Therefore, let us surmise that learned emotions invariably produce learned attitudes which often dominate, or at least influence, human reasoning.

The reversal of urban attitudes concerning rural schools and rural communities has become one of P.U.R.E.'s most difficult political tasks. Major mediums of news conveyance and editorialization are more often than not based in heavily populated, urban areas. It becomes easier for urban sources to relay the faults of rural areas since urbanites have the major media voice at their disposal. Rural people, inherently, do not have the same major voice. of new/opinion/ editorialization. Who, them, has the upper hand in formulating attitudes among all people, both rural and urban? People believe what they read; they believe what they hear. If rural citizens have lived with the constant media reminder that small is bad, inefficient, uneconomical, resource poor, and, through inference, incomparable to urban produced, urban-based models of all shapes and sizes, including education, then rural people, through no fault of their own, will start to believe what they read; and what they hear. Magnify and multiply urban produced and induced attitudinal 'mind-sets' of several decades and generations, and those who are self-professed

proponents of 'rural' as a way of credible, viable, and often-times superior lifestyles, do indeed face a monumental task in reversing well-established, urban based attitudes.

Nowhere are these urban-based attitudes more evident than in the printed media. The so-called "inefficiency" and "ineptness" of rural schools has literally jumped off the pages of daily tabloids. Urban readers cluck their tongues in an "I told you so fashion," and thereby reinforce their ideas of "small" and "rural," while once again the point is driven home to rural readers, like so many nails pounded in flesh, that what they are a part of has once again been cited as inferior, inefficient, and educationally inequitable. For decades rural people have waited for the inevitable 'axe' to fall. They have been reminded time and again that small is bad and economically inefficient. Rural people have been constantly informed that their K-12 institutions were program poor and therefore, through simple deduction, incapanle of providing the same high quality of education afforded urban institutions. Yet many rural school continued to produce a high quality graduate capable of competing with urban graduates in the professions and in the day-to-day work force. The media, however, bent on freeing Iowa and other rural states of their "smallness" and "inefficiency" continues to hammer away at the "inferior" rural school systems. It only stands to reason, analogously that is an individual is periodically reminded on a state-wide, national basis that he or she is indeed ugly, a negative attitude toward oneself will more than likely ensue. As the great contemporary cowboy-philosopher Will Rogers once stated, "All I know is what I read

in the papers." Unfortunately the same holds true for both rural and urban readers. Lay citizens, those not professionally involved with the daily business of education, have started to believe that rural schools are incompetent;incapable of providing quality education. "Small" has been equated with "inferior." Numbers have suddenly become important in providing quality education.

But small, rural schools are not inefficient. They merely begin with a smaller slice of the pie. If anything, rural schools have had to be more fiscally efficient in order to provide required courses and the many electives which the great majority of small school still offer. The one big question still left unanswered is, "what constitutes 'quality?'" Are a myriad course and program offerings quality? If so, then large schools do provide quality. Or is individual attention, individual participation, providing for individual needs dispositions, and a daily one-to-one, repetitive human-to-human contact, quality? If so, the pendulum swings back to the smaller schools.

What can the average lay citizen do? Attitudes have been established by major media voices. 'Small' is inefficient; 'small' is bad. "What choice do we really have" is a cry heard more and more. One of the answers, obviously, is contingent upon reversing the attitudes of those educational constituents who have slowly evolved into the thought-pattern of equating 'small' with 'poor.'

As a superintendent of a rural school I have discovered the following: That programs cannot be cut and still maintain a quality K-12 program; state aid to rural schools is minimal and local

property tax efforts usually at a maximum and still climbing; consolidation is not economically advantageous. Speaking as a superintendent, how do we handle these discoveries? James Coleman et al. has commented that, "because small rural schools are less complex and more manageable institutions, it is possible that they would have an inherent advantage in efficiently utilizing the resources that do possess." Speaking as a superintendent of a rural school, I concur.

This then, becomes the central political thrust of P.U.R.E.; to let our state legislators and state Department of Public Instruction officials know that our small, rural school are efficient, but that we will need help if we are to continue this efficiency. We have already been financially 'cut to the bone.' The only way to cut us further is to 'cut into the bone,' and if that happens, there will ultimately by no support on which to stand;financial or moral.

Margery Thompson, Associate Editor of the American School Board Journal, has adequately summarized the main thrust and intent of my address delivered here today. From her article entitled "A Lot We Can Learn from Those Not-So-Second-Rate Rural Schools" I have quoted the following paragraph as a means of illustrating the point we are trying to 'drive home' to the Iowa Legislature;that rural schools are efficient, creative, resourceful and worthy of the support necessary for continuance.

> What makes rural schhols different is the way they solve their particular problems. Because rural schools have long suffered from a lack of money, their boards and

administrators have for years learned to make do with what they have- as city and suburban school staff now must learn to live with restricted budgets. Becuase rural teachers and principals in isolated schools are thrown largely on their own resources, they have learned to plan and adapt materials for their own students- just as policymakers now suggest city and suburban school staffs do.

Ladies and Gentlemen, allow me to conclude with the closing remarks of my February, 1980 "The State of P.U.R.E. Address" to People United for Rural Education's Thrid Annual Conference held in Des Moines, Iowa. "The founder of a highly successful company was asked what it took to succeed. 'The same thing it took to get started,' he replied, ' sense of urgency about getting things done.' The people who make things move in this world share the sense of urgency. No matter how intelligent or able you may be, if you don't have this sense of urgency, now is the time to start developing it. The world is full of very competent people who honestly intend to do things tomorrow, or as soon as they get around to it. Their accomplishments, however, seldom match those of the less talented who are blessed with a sense of the importance of getting started now.

My friends, we must start now--we must start again. We must build People United for Rural Education into a strong, vibrant unfied voice capable of being heard throughout the land! Rural people must stand up and be counted in the thousands. PURE members must be urgent in their cause. It is not too late--not yet. Carry the PURE

message back to your communities. Push for involvement. Let us strive to show all concerned that People United for Rural Education is on the move, incessantly, in this predominantly rural state. And, I might add, that also includes the great State of Kansas.

Roger Baskerville is the Superintendent of Lohrville Community Schools, Lohrville, Iowa.